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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISIT TO NORTHEAST THAILAND HIGHLIGHTS U.S.  
OUTREACH EFFORTS IN THE REGION

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Ambassador's November 25-26 visit to Northeast Thailand highlighted U.S. outreach efforts in the region and conveyed the USG's ongoing commitment to building and sustaining cultural and economic ties that extend beyond Bangkok to all regions of Thailand. Emphasizing the value of U.S. economic investment in Northeast Thailand, the Ambassador met with Coca-Cola executives in Khon Kaen province, toured a local bottling facility, and visited two water development and conservation projects funded by the company. The trip focused on education as well, with the Ambassador visiting a local high school to discuss the recent U.S. Presidential election and educational opportunities in the United States. This high school visit and a joint visit by the Ambassador and American artist John Domont to a children's hospital for a "therapy through art" workshop underscored the Embassy's commitment to strengthening U.S.-Thai relations among young people. An Entry Level Officer accompanied the Ambassador on the trip, attending all of the meetings and events. END SUMMARY.

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Economic Investment  
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¶2. (SBU) Upon his arrival in Khon Kaen on November 26, the Ambassador explained in a televised interview that one of his aims for the trip was to better understand how the region is developing economically and to see first-hand U.S. investment in action. The Ambassador later met with Coca-Cola executives in Khon Kaen and toured a bottling plant in a visit that was organized by the U.S. Embassy's Foreign Commercial Service. Coca-Cola has been doing business in Thailand since 1949. The company currently employs more than 10,000 people and operates seven bottling plants and over 80 warehouses. Thailand represents one of the top 20 markets for Coca-Cola worldwide. The bottling plant in Khon Kaen is owned and operated by Thai Nam Thip, an authorized Coca-Cola bottler. Coca-Cola has a 49% ownership interest in Thai Nam Thip with the remainder owned by local Thai shareholders.

¶3. (SBU) Coca-Cola's investment in Northeast Thailand is not strictly economic. In recognition of the importance of clean water to its business, the company has invested in various water development and conservation projects in the local communities of the area. The Ambassador visited two such Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects in Manchakhiri, one of the poorest districts in Khon Kaen province. The U.S. Embassy's Foreign Commercial Service worked with Coca-Cola in arranging the CSR site visits.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador first visited Bann Huay Huak School in Manchakhiri, the site of a water storage tank and pipeline system

installed by Coca-Cola as part of its "Clean Water for Communities" project. Coca-Cola launched the initiative in June of 2008 in partnership with the Population and Community Development Association, a Thai nonprofit organization founded by Meechai Viravaidya, the well-known former politician and social activist. Coca-Cola has installed new water storage tanks and pipeline systems for 5,450 households, providing 738,000 liters of clean water to over 30,000 villagers.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador also toured Coca-Cola's long-term "Chi River Conservation" Project, where he planted trees in the Chi River watershed with the help of children from the local village. Recently, over 150 Coca-Cola staff joined local villagers in planting 1000 trees in the area. The project is a partnership initiative between Coca-Cola and the World Wildlife Fund that was launched in 2007 and will continue until 2011. The partnership aims to improve the natural environment of the Chi watershed and enhance the quality of life of community members.

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Education  
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16. (SBU) The educational component of the Ambassador's visit to Northeast Thailand included a visit to Khon Kaen University Demonstration School where he discussed the recent Presidential election with over one hundred high school students. The Demonstration School, founded in 1970, is part of the Faculty of Education at Khon Kaen University and serves as a grade K through 12 research school for university students and professors. The students' command of English, as well as the depth of their questions, was impressive and highlighted the potential of the region.

17. (SBU) The Ambassador was repeatedly asked during his trip to  
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Northeast Thailand about educational opportunities in the United States and the U.S. visa process. The questions revealed an apparent misperception among the region's residents that U.S. visas are difficult to obtain. The Ambassador emphasized during interviews with the press as well in meetings with Provincial Governors that while the screening process for U.S. visas is necessarily meticulous, here in Thailand over four out of five applicants are successful in their efforts to obtain a U.S. visa. He directed the public to the Embassy's website and noted that the current wait for an interview appointment was only one working day, thereby dispelling another common misconception about the visa process.

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Cultural Ties  
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18. (SBU) The Ambassador also joined John Domont, an artist visiting Thailand under the auspices of the ART in Embassies Program at U.S. Embassy Bangkok, for a "therapy through art" workshop with children at Srinakarind University Hospital. Srinakarind is the only research and teaching hospital in Northeast Thailand. The children who participated in the workshop are living with HIV/AIDS, cancer, or other chronic diseases. The hospital workshop culminated a very successful ten-day official visit by John Domont during which he conducted art workshops and seminars throughout Thailand.

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Visit To DEA and VOA Facilities  
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19. (SBU) Finally, the Ambassador traveled to Udon Thani province and visited the Mission's regional DEA office, as well as the Thailand transmitting station for Voice of America, now known as the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). The DEA in Udon consists of three U.S. agents and a local staff of four personnel. The office works with its Thailand counterparts in investigating and targeting the trafficking of drugs within the Northeast border provinces of Thailand and along the Mekong River. It also has

enforcement responsibilities in Southern Thailand.

¶10. (SBU) The IBB facility, located on 1300 acres in the Ban Dung District of Udon Thani province, transmits Broadcasting Board of Governors' programs from the Voice of America and Radio Liberty, as well as Radio Thailand programs produced by the Royal Thai Government. The facility has been broadcasting since 1994.

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Media Impact  
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¶11. (SBU) Media interest in the Ambassador's visit to the region was high with the Ambassador interacting several times with both print and broadcast media during his two-day tour. This coverage helped boost public recognition of the strength and importance of U.S.-Thailand bilateral ties, our cultural outreach, and the involvement of U.S. companies in CSR projects and the resulting positive impact on communities.

¶12. (SBU) In the Ambassador's nearly half-hour interview with the provincial branch of the state-owned National Broadcasting of Thailand (NBT) on November 26, he discussed U.S.-Thai relations and promoted U.S. investment in Thailand by highlighting Coca Cola's operations in Khon Kaen. The Ambassador also underscored the importance of educational exchanges to the relationship, and noted that Thailand ranks tenth in the world for the number of students it sends to the United States. The Ambassador also deflated some well entrenched notions that visas to the U.S. are difficult to come by. NBT Khon Kaen broadcasts to several adjoining provinces, and as many as five million viewers may have seen the Ambassador's interview when it was later broadcast on November 28.

¶13. (SBU) In both Khon Kaen and Udorn Thani, the Ambassador addressed large groups of local reporters after his meetings with the respective Governors. In addition to discussing the purpose of his trip and promoting education and trade, the Ambassador made one of his first widely reported public comments on the airport seizures by PAD protesters. When asked in Khon Kaen about the situation, the Ambassador said: "The U.S., as a good friend of Thailand, just wants to see this resolved peacefully and within the law and the Constitution. When you shutdown the international airport, for example, that is going to really negatively impact tourism, industry...Maybe it is only shutdown for a day, but it affects it for months." Many Bangkok-based newspapers including the Bangkok Post, Matichon, and Krungthep Turakit quoted the Ambassador on this

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point.

¶14. (SBU) Channel 7, Thailand's most watched television station with a reach of nearly 10 million nationwide, covered the Ambassador's hospital visit and gave the Ambassador the opportunity to shine a spotlight on both American compassion for the seriously ill, the use of art as a therapeutic tool, and the Art in Embassies program.

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